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MEXICO AND HER PEOPLE

BY ALFRED BISHOP MASON,

New York.

Some years ago, there was current at Harvard an excellent jest. Though it was at the expense of Yale and though I am one of Yale's loyal sons, I must admit the humor of it. The Harvard question was: "What is autobiography?" and the Harvard answer was: "Autobiography is any Yale man talking." Yet, to justify my speaking on Mexico to an audience like this, I must perforce weave a few bits of personal reminiscence into the web of my talk. And it is sometimes true, as Thackeray says, that the capital letter "I" is the straight line that measures the shortest distance between a speaker and his hearers.

A dozen years ago, when I was building a little railroad from Vera Cruz to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the government of Porfirio Diaz was not corrupt. It was white and pure. For each 31 miles of railroad built, there was a subsidy of \$800,000 in government bonds. To get them, I had to have a certificate from a government engineer that the road was built in accordance with specifications and a certificate from a government accountant that my books, accounts and vouchers were in proper shape. Engineer and accountant each had a salary of \$1,500 per annum. If, under similar conditions, I had been building recently a highway in the state of New York, what would I have had to pay intermediaries, engineers, officials, bagmen and friends of the powers that be—no, thank God, the powers that were? In Mexico I never paid a penny and was never asked to pay a penny of blackmail, commissions or graft. My experience was that of other Americans. It justifies me, I think, in saying the Diaz government was then pure. It is said that as he grew older, he became a tool of younger men who were grafters. I doubt this, but I do not know.

His government was arbitrary, of course. Most of my 300 miles of railroad were built through a sparsely settled country, where crimes of passion were rife and where theft was a fine art. I asked Diaz to send me some rurales. They were the state constabulary of

Mexico. A dozen of them arrived. The lieutenant in charge came to my office to report the arrival. He saluted, explained his errand, and enquired: "Señor Mason, whom do you wish killed?" He was clearly disappointed at not receiving a list of people to be shot offhand. It was interesting to hold the power of life and death in my hands, but I really could not think at the moment of anybody I wished to kill. A fortnight later, sitting in my car at the end of track, I saw a sergeant of rurales riding by with three troopers, each with a rope around the pommel of his saddle, each rope fastened about a plodding peon. The procession was closed by a sobbing woman. I hailed the sergeant and asked for an explanation. It seemed that one peon, whom we will call A, had quarreled with B about the woman. So A hired C to kill B, paying him his price, a whole peso, 50 cents in our money, in advance. C did not know B by sight. So C hired D for a quarter of the peso to point out B. This done, C knifed B. The rurales had gathered in A, C and D and the woman in the case. "We are taking them to jail, Don Alfredo," said the sergeant. The jail was many miles away. Within half an hour, the rurales came back. "Where are your prisoners?" I asked. "They tried to escape and we shot them." This is the well-known Mexican *ley de fuga*—the law of flight. Prisoners are troublesome and expensive. They are taken into the brush and shot. The *ley de fuga* is the stereotyped explanation.

Again, about 1900, a tribe of mountain Indians killed some prospectors looking for mines because they thought they were surveying their lands. Experience long since taught the Indians, who hold their lands in common, that a survey has as its sure sequel a seizure. These particular prospectors were working under a government concession. Diaz sent a regiment into the mountains. It captured, bound and shot, without a trial, nearly 1,500 Indians, practically all the adult males of the tribe. Not a word of this got into the papers.

Again, the governor of the state of Hidalgo was asked to resign by Diaz. He refused. Nothing happened for a few months. Then at dawn the governor was awakened by a spruce aide-de-camp who offered him a blank resignation to sign. When he demurred, the aide took him to the window and showed him a battery in front of the palace, infantry around the palace, a cloud of cavalry behind the infantry. The governor signed. The brigade melted away as silently as it had come. The papers said nothing.

Elections have always been a farce. A friend of mine sat as a congressman from part of Yucatan for 20 years. He was never in Yucatan and could not tell me the boundaries of his district. All he knew was that every two years he received word from Diaz that he had been elected again. I had been a resident of Mexico a very short time when I received an official notice to vote at a national election. I went to the polls. There were two policemen at the door of the room, three men in frock coats and silk hats within behind a table which held a ballot box. Not a voter was in sight. I explained that I had received the notice, but that I was an American citizen and had no right to vote. "If you wish to vote, señor," said the chairman, "it will give us the utmost delight to have you do so."

There is no middle class in Mexico. From the great land-owners with their retinues of lawyers, agents, favorites, you take one long step downwards to the small, the very small, retailer and the peon. Wholesale business and public utilities are in foreign hands. The peon mass in the north has been leavened by the return there of many thousands of Mexicans who have come across the border, working on railroad and other jobs, as far north as Minnesota, but southern Mexico is still sunk in the apathy of the ages.

There is no public opinion in the country. Diaz was a benevolent despot, supported by the feudal lords who owned the land, the land barons of Mexico. I asked the president once why he did not apply the single tax and so break up the large estates. "It must be done some day," he replied, "but one of my successors must do it."

These lords of land were lords of life as well. Terrazas owned 40,000,000 acres in Chihuahua. That is nearly one and one-half times the size of Pennsylvania. He was supreme ruler of that great state of Chihuahua, whether he, or his son-in-law Creel, or one of his sons, or some retainer of his was nominally governor. The police, the rurales, the alcaldes, the courts did only what he directed, were simply registering machines of his decrees. He used to be major-domo of a Señor Martinez del Rio, whose great estates, confiscated because he supported Maximilian, fell into his major domo's hands. Del Rio's son told me he had saved a remnant of his father's lands from Terrazas's clutch. "How much is this remnant?" I asked. "Barely five million acres," was the reply. That is nearly one fifth the size of Pennsylvania.

Mexican labor, fairly energetic when paid by the piece, slow

beyond all dreams and nightmares of slowness when paid by the day, is in every case unsatisfactory because it is intermittent. Here a laborer toils for one of two reasons, either to advance himself or to avoid being discharged. The peon has no wish to advance and if you discharge him he is rather grateful to you for having saved him the trouble of making up his own mind to stop work.

We misunderstand the Mexican, of course. The Spaniard is far more difficult than any other European for the Anglo-Saxon to understand. Mr. Rives, in his monumental book on *The United States and Mexico*, suggests that this may be because the Spanish blood has an Afro-Semitic base, with a strong Moorish intermixture afterwards. He quotes one ethnologist as saying that a Spaniard resembles the son of a European father by an Abyssinian mother. Be this as it may, the man was right who said: "Three deep gulfs divide mankind—age, sex and race. And of these the deepest is race."

Of one most beautiful Spanish characteristic, courtesy, we have scant share. The average American in Mexico behaves like a cad, with vulgar disregard of well-nigh sacred customs he cannot appreciate and of a delightful and stately courtesy he cannot approximate. Nor is it only the average American who so disports himself. When the second Pan-American Conference was held in the city of Mexico, Mrs. Diaz gave a *fête* at Chapultepec for the delegates and others. It was a scene from fairyland. I was talking with her when at her elbow the president's chief aide-de-camp said to the chairman of the United States delegation: "Senator, supper is about to be served and the President would like to have you give your arm to Mrs. Diaz and lead the way." "Well," said the old man, looking at his watch and closing it with a snap, "tell the President I'm much obliged, but its gettin' late and I'm goin' back to the hotel now. Come along, Mother." And thereupon he and his wife departed, without even saying good-bye to the President's wife.

The fundamental question in Mexico is the land question. The Mexican revolution will never be settled until it is settled right—by giving back to the people the land of which they were despoiled nearly four centuries ago. No statute of limitations runs against the right of men and women to free access to land. Those of you who are not single taxers may well weigh that pregnant fact. Its offspring may some day astound you. The three great forces, stronger

than laws or constitutions or armies or privilege, are men's hunger for food, men's hunger for women, men's hunger for land. Until the peon has an opportunity to get his 10 or 20 hectares of land, the peon will not be at peace.

What is there for the United States to do? Simply to watch and wait. It is weary work, this waiting, but as a great captain of industry once told me: "Waiting is the finest of the fine arts." Professor Patten's able argument in favor of our intervening because Mexico is not an industrial unit and our breaking it up into smaller states which are industrial units fails to convince me. Mexico is much more of an industrial unit than the United States were up to 1865. If economic forces are to break it up into smaller units it is still neither advisable nor right that those forces should be pricked into activity by American bayonets. We can occupy any part of Mexico we choose, at much cost of life, more cost of money, a colossal cost for pensions thereafter, and a terrible cost in the awaking of the devilish war-spirit which debauches a nation and its politics for a generation. When we have occupied it, what then? The French went where they would in Mexico, but whenever a French garrison marched out of a Mexican city Maximilian's rule ended in that city. The witty Pierre Bonaparte said of Napoleon's Mexican experiment: "My cousin is finding out that you can do anything in the world with bayonets except sit upon them." If we occupy Mexico, we shall simply sit upon our bayonets. Let us still watch and wait. Emerson says every institution is but the lengthened shadow of some stout and resolute person. Some day some stout and resolute person will rise from the southern welter, put the Mexican people back upon the lands of Mexico, and then—not till then—will there be abiding peace in that great country.